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Dropsy

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Dropsy

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Maryland &c.

It is a customary duty of every candidate who applies for the medical honors of a university to exhibit to his preceptors some specimen of his talent and industry in the arduous but interesting pursuit of his profession. The different branches which comprise the science of Medicine afford a wide field for his ingenuity and observation, and afford him an opportunity at least of speculating on the opinions and practice of his predecessors. But here it must be recollected the natural timidity which is felt in exhibiting the products of a fungean reading to the inspection of eminent and experienced Physicians — Little can be expected unless they pursue an experimental subject, where they have an opportunity of relating the result of their experiments — Hope the subject I have chosen will not be uninteresting I am certain at least that it is not an unimportant one — it is an attempt to investigate the nature of Dropsy and endeavour to prove that they are most frequently the effects of morbid action in the arterial system —

Dropsy

Dropsy is a preternatural collection of serous or watery fluid in the cellular substance or different cavities of the body, and receives different appellations according to the particular situation in which it is lodged. — I shall omit saying anything respecting the symptoms and treatment of the different states of dropsy, and propose to make a few remarks on the theory, and cure of dropsies in general without specifying any of the numerous names it derives from the different parts of the body in which they may be situated — my object is to endeavour to prove that most dropsies are the effects of morbid action in the bloodvessels, and the water which has been supposed to be their cause are as much the effects of morbid action as schirrus pus and gangrene are of previous inflammation — this I infer — 1st from the analogy it bears other arterial diseases, both in its causes and effects. — 2ndly from the symptoms which evidently indicate morbid excitement, and preternatural action in the arterial system — and lastly from the remedies that have been employed for the cure of these effusions. — I presume it is unnecessary to mention all the numerous, remote and occasional causes which produce them — they all induce predisposing, and nearly general debility with preternatural action in the arterial system — no more occurs here, than what we see in inflammatory fevers, active hemorrhagies, palsy, and other diseases, however much they are accompanied with excessive arterial action are always preceded by original debility, and accompanied by obvious debility in every other part of the system — it is well known that in fevers of every kind, and in every stage of life, there is a disposition to effusion in that part where there

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is the greatest determination. thus in inflammatory fevers, they take place in the lungs and joints, in bilious fevers they occur in the liver, and ~~of~~ the gout in every part of the body. the matter effused being influenced by the structure of the part in which it takes place. we are not surprized to see serous swellings in the joints follow acute rheumatisms, nor partial effusions of water, in the form of sweat in fevers, and who will deny they are ~~not~~ the effects of morbid action in the arterial system. again, we see half cured pneumonies, and neglected catarrhs produce effusions in the throat, remitting fevers in the brain, and scarlatina gout and intermittents precede them in other parts of the body. upon the whole it appears strange that those diseases so common, should not have been proper upon physicians the nature of most dropsical effusions, and the employment of the same antiphlogistic remedies which are used in the above mentioned diseases. It appears to have arisen from the erroneous opinion of its being a disease of debility, hence the employment of stimulating medicines in every case of dropsy. but we know this is an error, that debility is not a disease, it is only its predisposing cause. disease consists in preternatural strength in one part of system, occasioned by the abstraction of excitement from other parts. every argument therefore in favor of blood letting in a pleurisy applies here, the former only being of more acute, ~~nature~~ and demanding a more speedy use of it, and the latter of a more chronic nature.

2ndly the symptoms which indicate a morbid action or phlogistic diathesis in the arterial system are 1st a hard full and quick pulse, and sizy blood. this has been noticed by Drs Home and Zimmerman they are symptoms that unquestionably

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2ndly From its alternating with other diseases accompanied with expulsive action such as vertigo, madness, tertian fevers &c. this has been noticed by physicians —

3dly From spontaneous hemorrhagies, from the lungs, hemorrhoidal vessels and mouth — Mr. Cruikshanks relates a case of accidental bleeding from the rupture of a bloodvessel in the lungs of a dropsical patient he tells us that a quart of blood was discharged in consequence of which both the swellings and hoarseness which the patient had laboured under for some time gradually disappeared —

Doctor Rush to whom we are so much indebted for this theory among the many other important truths so clearly elucidated by this family of diseases relates a case in which spontaneous hemorrhagies took place from the nose and hemorrhoidal vessels suddenly reduced universal dropsical swellings. but I had the satisfaction of witnessing a case, which affords additional proof of the correctness of the above opinion — as cases of this kind rarely occur I beg permission to relate it — It not only maintains the doctrine contended for, but reflects some light on the utility of blood letting in chronic visceral obstructions it occurred in a patient who occasionally indulged in habits of intemperance — the debility induced by this vice, aided by the noxious effects of marshy miasmata to which his situation exposed him, produced obstructions and fever of the intermitting form. this continued for some time notwithstanding the remedies prescribed which were emetics, cathartics, tonics &c dropsical effusions ensued both in his abdomen

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abdomen and extremities, they gradually increased to a considerable degree. A hemorrhage occurred first the night from between the upper molar teeth it continued until morning, during which time he lost at least twenty ounces of blood. I was surprized at the state of his pulse, this, instead of being as I expected weak from the loss of blood, was more full and tense than usual, but what was more remarkable a great diminution of the swelling was perceptible the following morning. My patient appeared better for some days, and the effusion much lessened giving sensible of the relief obtained by the loss of blood. A profuse bleeding shortly occurred from the nose I unfortunately did not see the quantity thus discharged, but from what I could ascertain there was quite as much as at the first bleeding, recourse was had in checking it, this was not effectually accomplished until plugs were introduced, notwithstanding this, his pulse continued active, and required the use of the lancet before this action was subdued. after which diuretic medicines were administered, composed of nitre squills and calomel, they produced a slight ptyalism together with with evacuations and absorption of the water, times were likewise exhibited and the patient soon recovered this case evidently proves that the effusions were the effect of morbid action in the blood, for might not the pulse in the commencement of this disease have been depressed were there not sufficient congestion in, and stimuli acting on the arterial system to have produced this effect? the fullness and tension of the pulse after the hemorrhages gives countenance to this opinion. it is not rare to find the pulse low weak in the first stage of pneumony and apoplexy which is removed by the plentiful use of evacuations.

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I now come to make a few remarks on the remedies that have been employed for the cure of dropsy. There are 1st. bloodletting. This is not a new practice, we are informed that it was used by Doctor Home with success. Doctor Hoffman likewise cured dropsies accompanied with pulmonic consumption by this remedy. It ought to be more generally employed by the most eminent physicians and in a moderate degree with the happiest effects.

2nd. Emetics. This valuable class of medicines has among numerous other diseases been employed in this, and no doubt with the greatest advantage that evacuate the stomach and bowels diminish the frequency and force of the pulse, brace and dilate the relaxed, excitement and action from the arterial system, increase the lymphatics to absorb and discharge large quantities of water. The efficacy of these medicines in promoting absorption is not confined to dropsy, the matter of tubercles has been absorbed by the nausea and vomiting produced by sea sickness. Action of this kind is mentioned by Mr Hunter.

This Gentleman supposes there is a sympathy between the testicle and stomach, and that vomiting increases the action not only of the absorbents, but of all the vessels of the testis. In which reason he prescribed emetics in hernia humoralis. Should they be given to excite vomiting? Or are they more efficacious when nausea only is produced. We are told that vomiting does not diminish their diuretic effects, and that the squill or other succeeds best when it excites vomiting. There is on the other hand reason to believe, that a great deal may be expected from

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nausea, the great effects of emetics on the arterial system in checking hemorrhagy, appear to be produced by their action and not by the vomit ~~you excited~~

Purges. The efficacy of this remedy in the cure of dropsies is allowed by Physicians in all ages and countries both the mild and drastic have been much spoken of. The great Doctor Sydenham recommends the exhibition of gentle purges every day, both gentle & drastic act by diminishing the action of the arterial system and promoting absorption, so great are their effects in the latter case that Mr. Hunter supposing the matter of gonorrhoea or of venereal ulcers to be conveyed by them from every part of the body. It is well known that they diminish the heat of the body and the frequency and fullness of the pulse. this two circumstances together with the success attending their use strongly confirm the opinion of great morbid action in the blood vessels.—

Diuretics.—These medicines likewise have been generally employed and with great advantage they act on the blood vessels and kidneys by diminishing the action, and promoting the secretion of urine. I shall select a few only of the more important of the class. from the vegetable class digitalis and squills are most employed. The first is certainly an important article but the exhibition of it requires great attention, it is sometimes dangerous even in the hands of experienced Physicians. given in large doses it produces nausea, vomiting, purging, giddiness, vertigo, confusion of vision & increased secretion of urine. precisely such effects as are produced by the henbane, hemlock, stramonium, tobacco, and opium. Physicians are very much divided in opinion,

respecting its use in Dropsy. Doctor Haller would not use it, because he thought it unmanageable. Doctor Boerhaave mentions it as a poisonous plant. Doctor Cullen who has fallen into the same error with others, did not approve of its use in dropsy, because he thought it a disease of debility. but we know, that when given in small doses, and properly managed, it is a mild Medicine, and may be used with safety. We are likewise informed by late practitioners of great eminence and experience that it is well adapted to several states of this disease, and from our knowledge of its powerful influence over the heart and arteries, we are led to expect beneficial effects from its use. From Doctor Withering's valuable publication on this subject we may expect that great effects are produced by its use, given in some excellent advice on the employment of it. Doctor Fausse of Montpelier gave this medicine but with no very great success. of a number of cases in which he employed it, he tells us, it failed in one only as it cured, several of them were complicated cases. Doctor Darwin observes that digitalis is particularly proper in those dropsies from habitual intemperance in drinking, after using it he gave a decoction of artichokes and bark, together with opium. Doctor Parton in his valuable lectures on this subject, among other important information, confirms its efficacy in a similar case and thinks it well adapted to diminish that artificial or even apoplexy brought on by intemperance. Some physicians think it better adapted to some of the states of dropsy than others. I suspect its efficacy results from the reduction of internal action, but that is the reason why they entertain such different opinions respecting

use is, from its being given in different state of the system, or from a difference in the quality of the plant from the soil in which it grows or from the gathering and preparing it. squill there is a striking affinity between the squill and foxglove, they are both emetic cathartic and diuretic their effects upon the heart and arteries are the same first elevating and then depressing it. Doctor Barton tells us he has seen the pulse reduced to 39 in a dropsical patient. Nothing says Doctor Withering but the lancet can so completely lower the pulse as the squill. Its efficacy in dropsy is allowed by most physicians from the view of the subject taken, it is unnecessary to say anything more of this medicine. all that I need mention is, that it has been successfully employed in dropsical affections, and that by diminishing arterial action promotes the exception and absorption of the fluids. The other medicines from the class are some of the neutral salts viz. nitre and cream of tartar. both these medicines have been much recommended. Dr Home cured 14 cases out of 20 by the latter medicine. Dr Fothergill likewise speaks in high terms of it he desires it should not be given in dropsies of great weakness. they appear to produce their good effects by reducing arterial action, producing gently cathartic and diuretic. In addition to the success attending these medicines, I will mention other remedies which have been found very universally and performed cures upon the same principle. these are hard labour, low diet, fasting, feder &c. there is sufficient proof on record of the wonderful effects produced by them. and it is unnecessary

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From what has been said it appears, that most dropsies are arterial diseases, but that many cases do exist from other causes cannot be denied; such as diseased absorbents, or ruptured lymphatics, from schirrus, and other causes, and where our remedies do but little service. but I believe these cases are rare that few dropsies occur without morbid action in the blood vessels this action may be feeble as well as excessive in force, and requires opposite remedies. That morbid action is essential to dropsies will appear more evident from the following facts they seldom occur simply from debility: for in that case we should expect to meet with them in old people, and this is rarely seen. It is likewise not known to succeed any disease where evacuations have been carried to a sufficient extent. It seldom occurs in pulmonary consumption or in the last stage of those diseases called atrophy or marasmus, or those that die from inanition when there is the lowest degree of debility. I presume it is unnecessary to say more on this subject those enough has been said to confirm that dropsies are connected with a morbid state of the blood vessels: It analogy to other diseases the symptoms indicating this action and the effects of the above mentioned remedies, seems plain to be denied. Therefore in the treatment of this disease as in all others the lancet must be our guide

when it indicates excessive action it must be reduced by the above mentioned remedies, when too little action exists, most of the articles enumerated under the great class of tonics and stimulants including generous diet & drinks &c. great care should be taken to accommodate them to the strength and irritability of the patient system. When requisite recourse should be had to the aid afforded by Surgery.

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